

Christian Witness in Eastern Europe Since 1991¹

N. Gerald Shenk

In the years following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, how much has really changed? When we pay attention to news coverage of political and economic developments of the region, can we also discern the meaning of these times for churches? In what ways should we seek understanding and partnership with followers of Christ who are rooted in these various cultures?

For many of our brothers and sisters in faith, the crucial question is no longer how to survive communism and its collapse, but how to survive the recovery from communism in state socialist societies. Even at a great distance, we have all sensed the force of the maelstrom which hit these lands during communism's demise. Morality, civility and basic human dignity were all at risk. In the worst cases, they failed. We must acknowledge that the tests were extreme. People were provoked beyond the capacity of ordinary mortals to resist the fear, the hatred and rage.

Their failures are not only their own. We too are complicit as fellow humans when tragedy and devastation engulf an entire region. We share the burdens of ignorance and ineffectiveness, of responses not delivered in time, of futile paralysis in debates over intervention.²

Yet we also share strange confidence that the story of the churches in post-communist Eastern Europe is more profound than daily journalism or economic analysis alone may indicate. Our first observation on this brief interval is that there are now more changes, more churches, and more tragedy and grace than anyone could have imagined in the wake of the Cold War. Anchored in a reality deeper than the discredited political frameworks, faith communities and their leaders have been able to respond to urgent needs when all else fails around them. Proving faithful in small things, many are now expected to move into major responsibilities far beyond the scope of their training or expertise. A seminary director, long regarded as beyond the pale of civil society, now is invited to become the Rektor (Dean) of the regional university. A local pastor, previously barred even from visiting local institutions of social welfare, may be asked to take over the hospital, the orphanage, or the care of juvenile delinquents.

More broadly, Christians in every vocation long accustomed to discrimination

N. Gerald Shenk, associate professor of sociology of religion at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, Virginia, served nine years as a theological education in the former Yugoslavia. He continues to maintain close contact with the region.

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due to their religious identity now find that faith and moral character are highly sought after, as morale and basic morality plummet around them. Society and all its ordinary rewards are almost literally up for grabs. Stately trees lining the roads of Albania fall prey in winter to the ravages of a local populace left shivering for lack of imported fuel and foreign exchange. The trees and shrubs of Sarajevo were sacrificed in an even more deadly siege, along with nettles that barely served to stave off starvation.

We quickly realize that the collective sigh of relief at the passing of the Cold War has not translated into much enduring comfort. Tides of economic migration surged into flood stage, cresting with hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the unspeakable horror and atrocities of genocide (from the Balkans to the Caucasus and beyond). A fortress mentality shifted into open hostility toward the influx of aliens seeking asylum.

How much devilry is at work in this weary world, when inhumanity inspires such a response of inhospitable incivility? Yet how many righteous are required to save a city, to redeem the vestiges of humanity in a crumbling society, to retrieve the possibilities of dignity and integrity from the debris of calculated wickedness run rampant in destructive frenzies?

The gathering gloom of civilizations imploding makes even faint glimmers of hope seem like beacons in the night. Solitary acts of courage and compassion begin slowly to outweigh the hollow despair of violence. Promises kept and commitments honored can turn fragility into new strength, weaving gossamer trails of individual character into a fabric that stretches across the gaping wounds, bridges the ancient divides and extends with promise toward livable futures.

Early projections for the recovery from communism anticipated economic shake-down and restabilization stretching over a period of five to ten years. Hard times are now new in Eastern Europe. Millions of ordinary citizens have shown again their capacity to endure privation, resisting the lure of demagogues who vainly promise shortcuts to affluence. "Serbia has the resources to be just like Switzerland," trumpeted its leader, Slobodan Milosevic. Lotteries and criminal schemes of fraud alike tend to flourish in this climate of no confidence in economic solutions. Banks (in Moscow and Belgrade) and factories (everywhere) collapse, after offering impossible returns on investments to hedge against hyperinflation. Organized banditry thrives in every field, including customs, taxation, protection and other rackets formerly the monopoly of the state. The trappings of success, no matter what their origin, are more and more properly viewed with suspicion.

"Recovery from communism was bound to be difficult," people wryly observe. "But how are we ever to recover from this 'post-communism'?" This is all part of the background against which we must try to evaluate the work and witness of the Christian churches in Eastern Europe.

After residing in what was then Yugoslavia for most of the decade prior to 1989, and numerous visits elsewhere across the region during and since that time, I have had more than passing acquaintance with the churches and the choices they face. Last year I was even able to round out the observations with a brief visit to Albania, which had long been the most inaccessible of closed lands.

With frequent returns, both for teaching a course each year at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek (Croatia), and for ties to an emerging peacemaker movement, I have sought testimonies on the power of God's people to meet the tests of these critical times. It has been a privilege to be the bearer of my church's concern for other Christians and to convey some of our intentions for solidarity with them in decisive moments like these. Partnership in the Good News during hard times is most rewarding, especially when it is rooted in trust built up over previous decades shared far from the limelight of world crisis.

Perhaps the most productive interaction for my own further reflection has been the parallel I sometimes sense when intense and somewhat isolated sectarian communities of faith are drawn into a larger sense of social responsibility. Although frequently overshadowed by noisy debates about church and state (a discourse necessarily political), this dynamic is more social in character, defined in local and regional interactions. Not confined to the strictures between a handful of government and churchly bureaucrats, it is more like the cumulative impact of thousands of neighbors acting decently as citizens. They reach out and care for someone in need, having little incentive other than the reward of character and the hope for God's shalom. By caring for war's victims, for the displaced, unemployed and disabled, they undo the deadly poison of ethnic hatred and militarist propaganda: human community can be restored and people who are different can live together after all.

It is intriguing to note that the churches have virtually no competition in this task of restoring human community. Secular and separatist ethnic solutions have been discredited. Christian hope, it turns out, must run deeper than political or ideological optimism about the management of human evil.

In 1993 we set out to document accounts of peacemaking efforts undertaken by people of faith in the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia.³ By providing significant early attention to these scattered activities, we hoped to draw them into a supportive network for mutual reinforcement. After many inquiries and journeys throughout contested areas, we gathered a select group in a neutral location for roundtable discussion of religious efforts to end the violence and overcome the legacy of hostilities.

What distinguished the participants in this initial venture was like a litmus test for Christian response: prayer for enemies. Those who lit up with recognition at this question exhibited a quality of care for the victims that did not stop at boundaries; they were not consumed only with the losses of their own side. These were the folks who could be counted on to give shelter also to refugees from the wrong ethnic group, to speak out against wrongful evictions, to maintain ties of faith that bridge across political and military divides. By these acts of conviction and at some risk to themselves, these Christians modelled the only sure cure for virulent nationalism.

As children of God, we are privileged to have siblings like these. Their discoveries in the ethics of Christian response to extreme situations are a precious resource to us as well. We rejoice in the authentic character of a young Serbian soldier who refuses to join the attack on innocent civilians in Croatia. We delight in the courage of a Franciscan who crosses fresh battle lines to defuse the fear and arrange a cease-fire. We grieve with him in the murder of his father and many other close relatives

when that same region is later engulfed in the larger conflict and dragged into the abyss despite a year of diligent and effective peace process at the local level.⁴

Even while delighting in these witnesses against genocide, we do not deserve to take comfort in the fact that others have found appropriate responses unless we too are moved to compassion. The multitudes of real victims from these several years of turmoil require more than appreciation from us. I dare not bring these reports as a shortcut for consumers of international news coverage to move from indifference through exaggerated helplessness to mere relief that a handful of struggling Christians have found the right responses to immediate crises in Eastern Europe.

True compassion will oblige us to extend our partnership with the faith communities across Eastern Europe. Confessing our own share in the failures of the past, we can work together for the reconstruction which must follow years and generations of devastation. Urgent needs include millions of refugees and other victims of war. This aid should be unconditional, in a principled refusal to exploit the vulnerability of displaced populations. All who can be reached should benefit from it.

In the longer term, to resist the ethos of hatred, violence and revenge, we will seek to build a culture of peace. Much has been lost during the horrors of war, and not only in the Balkan region. More than the destruction of buildings and ruin of territories, the traumas have etched deep disfigurement on our capacity to trust each other. Merely to tolerate minorities will not be sufficient to redress the wrongs. Acceptance and embrace of the other are essential, urges Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf.⁵

It is wearisome to monitor the scramble of opportunist mission and other outside agencies rushing like carpetbaggers to take advantage of media attention when a region is in crisis. Market niches are clearly crowded with those who would cash in on temporary compassion. But local churches and their longterm partners will have virtually no competition when they take up efforts to restore basic trust, character and dignity for all the peoples of the region. It would be a crisis in our own civility if they could not count on us for partnership in this cause. In the welfare of these cities (Sarajevo—and Beirut, Belfast, Bogota, Jerusalem, Kigali, Los Angeles) we will pray to find our shalom as well.

Endnotes

¹ This updates my earlier article, "Churches, Changes and Mission in Eastern Europe," *Mission Focus*, 19:4 (December 1991), 49-52.

² Essential reading: Roy Gutman, *A Witness to Genocide* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

³ See the Research Report #15, *God With Us? The Roles of Religion in Conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia*, by Gerald Shenk and David Steele (Uppsala: Life and Peace Institute, 1993).

⁴ These and other accounts are presented in the video by Mennonite Media Ministries, "Beyond the News: Hope for Bosnia."

⁵ See, Miroslav Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of 'Ethnic Cleansing,'" *Religion in Eastern Europe* (December, 1993). This journal is exceptionally valuable for regular coverage of church life in the region.